

Awkwardly hysterical: theorizing black girl awkwardness and humor in social media

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This paper explores the intersections of digital media and black women's identities using the concept of 'black girl awkwardness', a concept made popular by writer and comedienne Issa Rae. Rae's viral Web series, *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, that stars Rae as a J, a social introvert trying to navigate her love life and career. J's self-proclaimed awkwardness signifies the possibility of black women's normalcy and humanity by showcasing her social ineptitudes in common situations. Black girl awkwardness serves as a cultural indicator of how black women navigate race and identity in twenty-first century popular culture. Unlike 'quirky', a term used to identify white women in comedy, awkwardness is racialized and political, a tool for black women to both identify and work through the social-cultural discomfort surrounding their bodies. Black girl awkwardness in social media humor serves as a cultural workspace to address not only their personal anxieties but the African American community at large. Thus, social media sites such as YouTube make room to address the marginalized narratives and experiences of contemporary black women. Rae and other black women's use of social media plays a significant role in pushing forward conversations about the complexity of black women's lives.

Keywords: Issa Rae; awkwardness; YouTube; race and social media

It all made sense: my shyness, all the times I was dismissed for not being 'black enough', my desire to reframe the images of black film and television ... these were all symptoms of my Awkward Blackness. *This is an identity.*

— Issa Rae, *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*

Once upon a time, I was an awkward black girl. White socks matched my black Keds. Inopportune growth spurts hiked my jeans up past my ankles and made full length sleeves into three-quarter lengths. 'Don't worry about that, now they just look like clam diggers', my grandmother joked. It is a sad day when your grandmother got jokes. I loved *ElfQuest* (I still love *ElfQuest*), Leonardo Di Caprio and hip-hop. My awkwardness was hormonal and cultural. Awkwardness was a way of life.

Issa Rae's 2011 Web comedy series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (hereafter *Mis-Adventures*) touched the soft and nerdy core of my heart. The show centered around a young black woman named J, played by Rae, and her daily interactions with friends, coworkers and navigating life as a nerdy and socially inept black woman. J's inner narrations of her thoughts and persona as a notebook gangsta rapper went viral.¹ Rae, a self-certified 'blerd' (black nerd) and awkward black girl, utilizes social media and humor to confront the microaggressions and anxieties black women face on a daily basis.

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In her 2015 autobiography, also named *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, Rae weighs in on the significance of social media as a cultural workspace for black women. Rae writes, ‘if it weren’t for YouTube, I would be extremely pessimistic, but I’m not anymore. YouTube has revolutionized content creation. If it weren’t for YouTube, I would still be at the studios trying to convince executives that Awkward Black Girls really do exist’ (45).² The hunt for visibility is not a new challenge for black women. Twitter, Tumblr and Pinterest allow black women to visualize themselves, establish communities and share/document their experiences online. Lisa Nakamura observes how digital media spaces are becoming increasingly occupied by marginalized groups: ‘women and people of color are both subjects and objects of interactivity; they participate in digital racial formation via acts of technological appropriation, yet are subjected to it as well’ (16). Digital spaces as popular culture amplify as well as buffer contemporary discussions of racial identities and agency. Social media allows black women and black folks in general to bring awareness to issues and concerns otherwise marginalized in offline spaces. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, a call for black political and cultural mobilization organized by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, started as a hashtag on Twitter.³ While #BlackLivesMatter serves as a bridging political and cultural statement for young black protestors, it is important to note that this call for political mobility springs from young black women who utilized social media as a space for social change and critique. Perhaps even more significant than the ability to create black women’s narratives is the ability to archive and document their existence by their own account(s).

Mis-Adventures is not a direct political statement although Rae is very vocal elsewhere about the need for black folks to mobilize for social–political change. Rather, *Mis-Adventures* creates a sense of black agency by introducing the possibility of black women as human beings. The show challenges the status quo of who (not necessarily what) is considered normal by displaying ‘normal’ everyday experiences. Rae’s use of humor is particularly fitting for teasing out the complexities of contemporary black women, especially for millennials who are swept up in the current moment’s desperation to be considered color-blind and remain aloof to racial disparities and privileges. Rae’s comedic performance is a statement of self-affirmation/actualization using social media and humor as a bridge for her personal experience and the black community at large. Of particular interest for this essay is Rae’s extensive use and categorization of the term ‘awkward’. As a black female comedic writer, Rae’s use of awkward does multiple layers of work: it humanizes, visualizes and pushes back against standard performances of (comedic) femininity. That is, Rae’s use of humor to self-objectify her awkwardness renegotiates the terms through which her blackness and womanhood are read. Much of this is in part to her extensive and calculated use of social media to establish a persona that blurs social, political and cultural norms as they relate to popular culture and black women. Rae’s performance of awkwardness mirrors the social peculiarities that mark the United States’ current culturescape. Social media allows Rae’s access to space to amplify her personal awkwardness and the way American society awkwardly handles her position as a black woman and comedienne.

Awkwardness signifies the shifts in how black women in twenty-first century popular spaces navigate interlocking discourses of race and gender that dictate our day-to-day lives. Consider the backlash against the short comedy sketch, ‘The Harriet Tubman Sex Tape’. In August 2013, Russell Simmons used the sketch to launch his YouTube Comedy Channel All Def Digital. In the skit, a fictitious Tubman and a fellow slave plot to blackmail Tubman’s owner into freeing the slaves on his plantation.